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ABSTRACT

This report provides baseline data on professional development and training needs for teachers of less commonly taught languages (LCTLs). Surveys administered to LCTL teachers working in higher education addressed a range of issues relating to the following: the teaching context; the teacher's professional background and qualifications; the teacher's current job situation; and perceived professional development needs. Overall, enrollment levels in LCTL classes varied considerably. Class sizes tended to be small. The highest reported enrollment in advanced classes was in Italian. Many students were heritage speakers of the languages. Often, students had specific research interests in their language. A growing trend in some LCTLs with large heritage groups was to offer courses tailored to that group, segregating rank beginners from those with at least some exposure. A common complaint among teachers was that LCTL materials were outdated. However, for many languages, new materials had been published in the 1990s. Most teachers worked full time, held tenured or tenure-track positions, and had a Ph.D. degree. Relatively few had extensive preparation specifically in pedagogy. Five professional development needs noted were advocacy for teachers, information about professional issues, opportunities for collaboration, information about technology use, and e-mail list-servs. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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Teacher Professional Development for the Less Commonly Taught Languages

by Bill Johnston and Louis Janus

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CENTER FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Office of International Programs

Teacher Professional Development for the Less Commonly Taught Languages

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Teacher Professional Development for the Less Commonly Taught Languages

Introduction

In recent years, this country has seen a remarkable revival of interest in the teaching of less commonly taught languages (Walton, 1992). While traditionally such teaching has been concentrated in higher education, recent trends have seen it spilling over into secondary and even primary education, and incorporating languages learned primarily for cultural and social reasons (heritage languages, indigenous languages) as well as those studied for practical goals (e.g. language for business purposes) along with the more "academic" purposes of many university-level courses. MLA statistics for the last thirty years show that, while college enrollments have steadily fallen for the MCTLs (More Commonly Taught Languages) French and German, they have increased in many of the LCTLs (Less Commonly Taught Languages) (Brod and Huber, 1997). Brod and Huber report that in the five year period between 1990 and 1995 alone, there was a substantial increase in enrollments for several languages, notably Chinese, Arabic, ASL, Korean, Vietnamese, and Hawaiian (p. 56). Statistics for K-12 language education show a similar tendency, with particular increases noted for languages such as Japanese and Chinese (Branaman and Rhodes, 1998).

This dramatic expansion of teaching, however, has not been matched by a concomitant rise in the amount or quality of teacher preparation and teacher professional development available for teachers of less commonly taught languages (Walker and McGinnis, 1995). At a "summit" of LCTL teachers a few years ago (Stenson, Janus, and Mulkern, 1998) teacher training was identified as one of the most important needs felt by the teachers.

The present report aims to provide some baseline data on professional development and training needs for those engaged in the teaching of LCTLs. Using questionnaire data, we examine the status quo and explore the needs of teachers as they themselves perceive them. It

must also be pointed out that the literature on teacher professional development for teachers of LCTLs is somewhat sparse (though see Rifkin, 1992, and the references contained therein; and Walker and McGinnis, 1995). In light of this fact, the present paper is intended to serve both as a record of the current situation, and as a planning document for future action. Some of what we have to say merely lays out what we see as realities that must be acknowledged and addressed. Later in the paper, we will build on this description by making suggestions for future directions in terms of professional needs, research, and advocacy for teachers of LCTLs.

In choosing to focus on teacher professional development for LCTLs, we are assuming not just that "LCTL" is a useful category, but that "LCTL teachers" also have something in common. We should say a few words about this.

At one level, we believe firmly that language teaching is the same whatever the language. Whether one teaches ESL, German, or Hindi, similar issues and problems crop up. We believe that the relevant distinctions are not between particular languages so much as between classes aimed at different age levels, and set in different social, political and cultural contexts.

Yet for all their diversity, the contexts of LCTL teaching in the U.S. do have an important unifying social and cultural dimension. There are significant institutional commonalities across various otherwise disparate language programs. Hindi, Hawaiian, Irish, Dutch, and Czech are united by a certain marginality, lack of resources and visibility, and clout. We will provide evidence to support this claim in the course of the discussion that follows. It seems to us that these commonalities make it valid to consider the LCTLs together, and to make claims and suggestions that are intended to apply to a broad range of languages and to those who teach them. Those LCTL teachers and program administrators who read this article will be the best judges of whether this claim is tenable; for our part, our work with

LCTLs and LCTL teachers over the last two decades has convinced us of its value, and the results of the survey bear out our conviction.

The survey

This paper reports on the results of a questionnaire survey administered to LCTL teachers working in higher education (see Appendix A for the questionnaire itself, and also the LCTL website <http://carla.acad.umn.edu/lctl/survey/survey.html> for more complete statistical data). The questionnaire addressed a range of issues relating to four key areas: the teaching context; the teacher's professional background and qualifications; the teacher's current job situation; and perceived professional development needs. Responses were anonymous. The questionnaire was first piloted in a small-scale study of 32 teachers at four large research universities; this pilot study enabled us to ensure that the questions being asked elicited the information needed.

The questionnaire was sent in spring 1999 to 2000 teachers of less commonly taught languages at 1850 institutions in the U.S. Names and addresses were taken from the LCTL project database at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota. We received a total of 234 responses (a response rate of 11.7% from teachers at 154 different institutions representing the full range of sizes and types of U.S. tertiary institutions). 84 different languages were represented in all, from all geographical areas, though with a preponderance of Indo-European and Asian languages. In terms of the number of teachers, four languages dominated: Russian (33 teachers), Latin (33), Japanese (31), and Chinese (26).

Information from the returned questionnaires was entered into a computerized database to allow easy access. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis was performed. The former consisted primarily of calculating basic statistical information. The latter involved a

more sensitive analysis of the open-ended questions in the final part of the questionnaire, including teachers' additional remarks in the "Any other comments?" section.

Our analysis will be divided into two parts. First, we shall look at the present situation of LCTL teachers as it is reflected in the responses. Second, we shall examine the future professional development needs of the teachers as they express them. After this, we will consider how these needs, and the sociopolitical realities of LCTL teaching, relate to current thinking in the field of language teacher education. Finally, we will consider what steps might be taken to begin addressing the needs expressed in the survey.

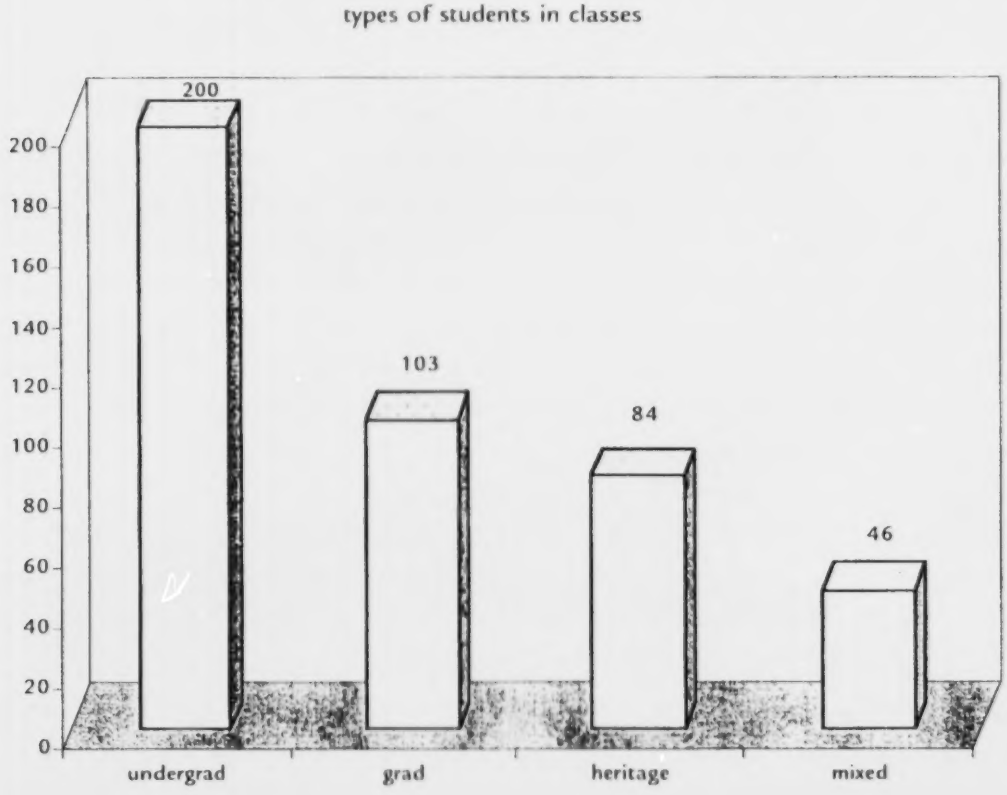
The status quo

Context

For those familiar with LCTL teaching at the tertiary level, there were few surprises in the information provided about the size and scope of the programs in which the teachers taught. Enrollments at a given level varied considerably, though with a preponderance of low figures. Numbers of students in first-year courses ranged from 2 or 3 up to 50, with an average of about 15-20 per language. These numbers dropped off in the second and third years (averaging around 14 and 7 respectively). Class size also tended to be small: the average size was 8, with a range from 1 to 30. It was clear too from teachers' comments that enrollment was irregular, with significant variation from year to year.

While the MLA data present enrollments by language throughout the United States, this survey requested information about specific levels at specific institutions. Many respondents noted only one student in their first year courses (for languages ranging from Classical historical languages like Gothic, Sanskrit, Biblical Greek, Old Norse and Old Irish, to contemporary World languages such as Tagalog, Serbian, and Wolof. Some of the surprisingly high enrollments respondents listed include a few Native American languages

such as Crow (15-16 enrollees) and Navajo (30 students), Oneida (20) and Lenape (5 students). The highest reported enrollment in advanced (what we called "beyond third year") was in Italian (from two instructors reporting an average of 10 students. (One of the schools reported between 80 and 100 students in first year Italian.)



As concerns the identity of the students in LCTL classes, many teachers reported that they often are heritage students, although the density seems to vary with the language. Several respondents stated that they rarely have heritage students (for example, less than 1% of Turkish students at one institution) while Norwegian and Swedish report at least half of their students have heritage interests. One teacher mentions that her Swedish students often have one parent who speaks Swedish. Up to 80% of Hindi students at one institution have family ties to South Asia, not uncommonly the language their parents spoke when they

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immigrated to the U.S. An Arabic teacher mentioned that the heritage of friends is frequently a factor in motivating students to study his language.

Several teachers report that their students have specific research interests in their language, for example students of medieval literature who take courses in Old Norse. A common thread was that a partner, spouse or friend spoke the language, or the students wanted to travel to the target country. One respondent wrote that most of the students in his advanced Finnish class had recently returned from an extended stay in Finland. Several teachers noted that their classes are mostly composed of graduate students, whereas several respondents reported that their students were for the most part undergraduates who needed to satisfy their language requirement, and sadly had "with no exposure to foreign languages and with little understanding of their own native English language—even bright students are hampered by this lack of linguistic sophistication."

The growing trend in some LCTLs with large heritage groups is to offer courses tailored to that group, segregating rank beginners from those who have at least a family background in the language, and at most are adept with the spoken language but need to focus on literary skills. One respondent summarizes a typical approach: "Heritage students typically opt for our administratively separate writing, reading course, and are infrequently admitted to spoken language courses." A Russian instructor reports "occasionally I'll get a students whose native language is Russian, but who writes it badly or not at all. This, I feel, is a legitimate need, and I don't mind having these students in class."

While the concept so-called "cross over students" often study a language that is related to their major language to widen their horizons in a linguistic area. A teacher of Czech, for example claims that "half of the students study other Slavic languages." Polish and Ukrainian are popular with Russian majors at one institution and several students in a Portuguese class were majoring in another Romance language.

An interesting finding emerged regarding course books used. A common complaint amongst LCTL teachers is that LCTL materials tend to be out of date. However, of the materials mentions whose dates were given, we noted 23 languages for which new materials had been published in the 1990s. For many of the languages represented here it seemed as if more recent materials are both available and in use. For several other languages, however, the survey responses do indeed suggest that there is a lack of more recent course materials.

Naturally, the existence of new materials says nothing about their pedagogical value. A survey conducted before the LCTL summit in 1996 (Stenson et al., 1998) found that most of those who reported using a text said the books they use had been published within the last 10 years; yet some of the published textbooks are re-issues of texts first produced in the 60s and 70s, and several teachers reported that even texts first published in the 90s were dated with respect to style of instruction and content. Nevertheless, much of the material mentioned in our own study does appear to be new; and, with the caveats given above, we see grounds for cautious optimism as far as materials for at least certain languages are concerned.[1]

The teachers

The picture of the teachers that emerged also caused a few surprises. Another assumption we had been making, based on impressionistic data, was that many LCTL teachers work part-time. This was not in fact the case with this group of respondents. Of the 85 teachers who responded to this question, fully 66, or 78%, identified themselves as working full time.

We were also surprise to see how many of the teachers were in tenured or tenure-track positions. Of 230 responses to this question, 165, or 72%, reported that they have such a

[1] For those interested in finding more information about materials available in particular languages, we recommend the UCLA Language Materials Project Database, which can be reached at: 360 Kinsey Hall, Box 951487 University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California 90095-1487 Phone (310) 267.4720 Fax (310) 267.4722 Website: <http://www.lmp.ucla.edu>.

position. Of the remaining 65, only 17 had permanent contracts; the remainder were working on annual or even semester contracts. However, it is also likely that our survey more often reached those whose names are registered in the CARLA database—that is, those who have been associated with their program for a considerable time; and that, conversely, the survey was not received by many of the graduate students who teacher LCTLs in many, especially larger intuitions (such as those where the authors of this report work).

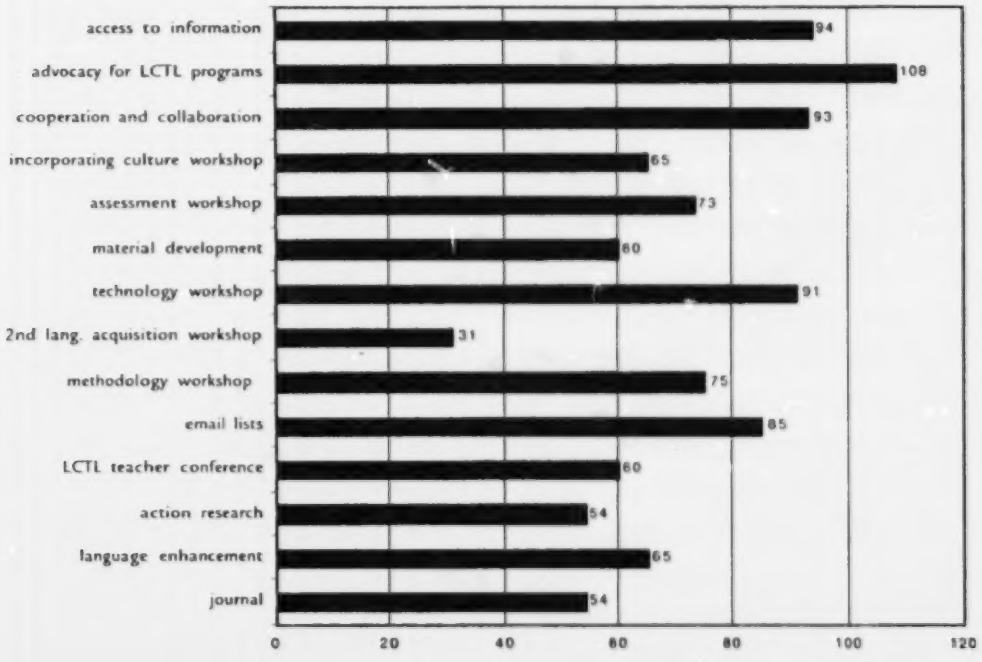
These latter statistics were particularly significant in light of the information provided regarding professional qualifications. Fully 192 of the respondents (82%) held a Ph.D. degree; almost all the others had an M.A. Once again, we suspect that this imbalance may not be an accurate reflection of the broader population of LCTL teachers.

Another fact that emerged concerning qualifications was that relatively few informants had extensive preparation specifically in pedagogy. A few had pedagogy-related qualifications; others had taken single courses, or had participated in workshops over the years. Many indicated that their primary source of "training" consisted of the years they had spent in the classroom. It seems reasonable to say that many LCTL teachers do indeed lack solid formal training in language pedagogy. The pre-summit questionnaire referred to above also found that many teachers lacked extensive training in the teaching of languages (Stenson et al., 1998, p. 44-49). We will return to aspects of this issue later, in particular to the involvement of graduate students as teachers.

Finally, of 217 responses regarding native speaker status, 82 teachers (38%) identified themselves as native speakers of the language they taught, and 135 (62%) as non-native speakers.

Perceived needs

In our final section, we asked respondents to indicate up to five professional development needs from a list we provided; we also left additional space to add items we had not included. Our goal was to get a sense of how the teachers themselves perceive their needs, and in particular which of these needs take priority for them. In all, 1007 checks were included at an average of 4.3 per respondent. The overall breakdown of perceived professional development needs is given in Figure 1.



From the figure, it is clear that five professional development needs were more keenly felt than any others. These are, in descending order of popularity:

1. Advocacy for LCTLs and LCTL teachers. (108)
2. Information about professional issues. (94)
3. Opportunities for collaboration. (93)
4. Information about use of technology. (91)
5. E-mail list-serves. (85)

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Two themes can be seen to emerge from these desiderata. The first is the theme of connection and collegiality. Respondents consistently selected forms of professional development that involve making and maintaining connections with colleagues in the field over those that involve primarily working at an individual level. The latter include such features as work on language enhancement and workshops on methodology, SLA, or assessment; all these ideas received relatively few votes. On the other hand, there was much more support for collaboration among colleagues, and for forms of professional connection such as e-mail listservs. Overall, it seems clear that professional networking and dialogue is highly desirable for these LCTL teachers. It is also entirely likely that in many cases, this desire springs from a sense of professional isolation—in situations where programs are small and languages relatively obscure, it is often the case that teachers have few colleagues teaching the same language in the state and even the country, let alone within the institution. It is worth noting in this regard that many languages already have a separate organization[2], while others have instead or in addition other forms of interaction such as the e-mail listservs for Polish, Celtic languages, Hindi, Nordic languages, Hebrew, and Dutch sponsored by the University of Minnesota's LCTL Project.

The second theme picks up on this isolation and gives it a political edge. By far the most popular choice in the list we offered was "advocacy for LCTLs and LCTL teachers." Almost half the respondents selected this option. This fact indicates that the geographical and professional isolation described in the previous paragraph becomes a political isolation, in a dual sense. First, LCTL programs are often institutionally isolated, lacking the visibility, the perceived importance, and the sheer clout of larger, more prominent programs, and this is

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[2] The National Council of Organizations of Less Commonly Taught Languages (NCOLCTL) acts as an umbrella organization bringing together the various associations devoted to particular languages or language groups. They may be contacted at: National Foreign Language Center, 1029 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20005. Telephone (202) 637-8881. Website: <http://www.councilnet.org>

reflected in popular views of the LCTL in question, which in turn translates into both institutional support and enrollment figures. One respondent states:

> *I've starred "advocacy" on the previous page because I think that one of the most important things is communicating the* ***value*** *of our disciplines to administrators, trustees, faculty in other fields, and of course students. And their parents.*

Second, in connection with this point, despite their high levels of qualification and even their job security (see above), LCTL teachers are often under-supported and under-appreciated, and lack a power base from which to agitate for change. Several respondents associated the issue of advocacy with the eternal problems of enrollments in LCTL classes:

> *Advocacy is so important for me as a Russian instructor, because my profession is disappearing all around me. Next year I will lose the single full-time colleague I have had in 24 years...no chance of replacing her because of decline in enrollments.*

One respondent directly addressed the link between the standing of teachers and opportunities for professional development. It is worth quoting his or her words at length:

> *This job is so unstable—every year the program is threatened. I still do not have confirmation on my post for September and it is mid-June. It is hard to say how much I personally want to invest in development when it seems that I need to leave the field completely. We get paid so little and it is expensive to attend conferences and workshop with no support from my school. I work on developing materials, putting together new courses, using technology, doing course assessments and student evaluations...etc., all on my own.*

It is worth adding that this teacher was working at a large and wealthy private university in the east.

We would argue that two implications arise from this discussion. First, any attempt to work for the professional development of LCTL teachers must acknowledge the political base from which they are working; conversely, it would seem that part of the business of professional development must involve addressing these issues of political standing head on. Second, we suggest that the standing of LCTL teachers is intimately bound up with the standing of the LCTLs themselves, and that part of bettering the lot of teachers must involve a

careful consideration of how LCTLs are perceived both inside and outside universities and other educational institutions, and what might be effective ways of enhancing these perceptions of the less commonly taught languages and their role in American society today. One respondent, for example, wrote that: "Teaching of minority languages in Russia (Eurasia) is extremely important for America," explaining that the 30 languages spoken by 12 million people in this region "have high importance and will become political factors in the foreseeable future." We propose that it is precisely this kind of argument that needs to be aired in the public arena if the situation of LCTLs, and hence of LCTL teachers, is to improve. One teacher proposes that we "make the LCTLs compulsory somewhere along the line," a notion echoed by another respondent who then however bemoaned the fact that "university administrators are unresponsive" to calls for expanding LCTL instruction. It is these issues that must be directly addressed at the political level if LCTL teaching is to move forward.

To sum up, the picture that has emerged of the group of LCTL teachers who responded to this questionnaire is as follows: They are highly qualified, though not necessarily trained as teachers; though many are in tenured or tenure-line positions, they have limited means available for their own professional development. Furthermore, in envisioning their own professional situation and future development needs, they think primarily in two broad categories: firstly, in terms of consolidating their somewhat marginalized political positions; and second, in terms of building and sustaining collegial connections with fellow professionals.

Conclusions: Future directions for LCTL teacher professional development

We wish to end by attempting to identify some future directions for those involved in LCTL teaching and in working with LCTL teachers.

The first issue concerns the theme of collegiality that emerged from the questionnaire and was also a feature of recent work in language teacher education. This seems a crucial point

to bear in mind in designing any kind of professional development activities for LCTL teachers. Research in teacher development has shown that teachers learn most effectively from each other and from themselves (e.g. Edge, 1992; Duckworth and the Experienced Teacher Group, 1997; Bailey et al., 1998; Clair, 1998); many of the forms of collaboration mentioned in this article are highly conducive to such learning. Furthermore, there is much that LCTL teachers stand to gain from a connection among teachers of various languages. Given the professional and political isolation described above, strength in numbers would seem a particularly attractive idea for teachers of the less commonly taught languages.

Another theme which has emerged somewhat obliquely from the data, yet which we believe is central to questions of teacher development and teacher identity, is the need for a concerted effort in the field of public relations, to make those in the broader society—everyone from policymakers and politicians to parents and schoolchildren—aware of the importance of the teaching and learning of the less commonly taught languages, and of the possibilities that exist within their own communities. It is only through increased public awareness of this importance that LCTL teachers will be able to play a more central role in their institutions and in the educational systems of which they form a part.

Related to this, it seems essential that professional development in the narrow sense—workshops, courses and so on—be accompanied at least with an awareness of the political context in which the teachers work, and preferably with some form of political action. The two things may seem not to be related; yet, as our survey has shown, in reality they are. Witness, for instance, the comment from one teacher, cited above, who complains that she or he is unable to take advantage of such professional development opportunities as already exist, because of lack of institutional support. This is a clear example of the way political status and professional development cannot help but be linked together. If we wish to develop as LCTL teachers, part of that development should involve spending time examining our own

standing within our respective institutions and considering how that standing might be enhanced.

Lastly, though the study described here was fairly extensive in its reach, it is by no means certain that the teachers represented here are representative of all LCTL teachers. In particular, we suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the large numbers of graduate student teaching LCTLs; though these teachers are even more disempowered than their faculty supervisors, they also bring an admirable energy and freshness to their work, and we argue that their professional development needs should also be taken into consideration.

A survey such as this can only scratch the surface of the complex world of LCTL teaching, and offers only tantalizing glances of the situations of many teachers. More in-depth research is needed. Especially if one agrees with the principle that teachers learn from each other, it seems that research such as case studies of actual LCTL classrooms would be particularly useful. Research of this kind could explore in detail the actual ways in which experienced teachers pursue their own professional development, how this process can be conceived as teacher learning, and in what ways it relates to the processes of teaching and learning that take place in LCTL classrooms.

The nature of this study means that the generalizability of its findings cannot be guaranteed. Nevertheless, we hope that it will at least have put LCTL teacher development on the map, and will have opened a dialogue about the best way to go about this development and to support it with empirical research. As we have already said, it is only through dialogue in any sphere that progress will be made.

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Questionnaire: Professional Development Needs of LCTL Teachers

Name of institution: _____

Department: _____

A. Your teaching situation

1. What language do you teach? [Note: If you teach more than one language, please provide information for all the languages you teach]

2. How many years of this language does your institution typically offer? Which levels are you usually responsible for?

3. Does your institution offer this language each year?

4. At any given time, how many students are there typically:
   - In one class?
   - At each level?
   - Studying this language at your institution?

5. What kind of students do you have teach? Graduate students? heritage students? A mixture? Please say a few words about this.

6. Which course book or books do you use? Please give the author, title, and year of publication.

B. Your professional background

7. What qualifications do you have? Please include all degrees, diplomas, certificates etc. Also, please indicate with an asterisk which of these qualifications relate directly to the language(s) you teach.

8. Are you a native speaker of the language you teach?

C. Your work situation

9. Are you a tenured or tenure-line faculty member of the institution where you teach?

10. If not:
    - What kind of contract do you have: permanent? annual? semester? What is your official title?
    - Are you full-time or part-time?

11. Many teachers have other duties aside from teaching language (e.g. research, teaching literature). Approximately what percentage of your job is devoted specifically to language teaching and related issues?

D. Professional development needs

12. We'd like you to read over the list of things that we consider to fall into the category of professional development for language teachers. If there are areas of professional development you feel we have missed, please add these in the place provided. Then, please check the five that you consider the most important for you at the present time in your situation.
    - ❒ A new journal devoted to practice and research in LCTL teaching
    - ❒ Language enhancement work
    - ❒ Opportunities for action research (research on your own classroom that you yourself conduct)
    - ❒ A conference (e.g. annual) for teachers of LCTLs
    - ❒ An e-mail listserv or discussion group for teachers of my language
    - ❒ Workshops or course work on:
        - language teaching methodology
        - second language acquisition
        - using technology in LCTL teaching
        - making one's own teaching materials
        - how to assess language learning
        - incorporating culture into language teaching
    - ❒ Opportunities for cooperation and collaboration with colleagues (e.g. teachers of other LCTLs)
    - ❒ Advocacy for LCTLs and LCTL teachers at the university, state, federal level
    - ❒ Lobbying for enhanced job security
    - ❒ Access to information about professional issues (conferences, training opportunities, availability of materials etc.)
    - ❒ Increased access to materials in the language you teach
    - ❒ Increased opportunities to travel to the country or countries where your language is spoken
    - ❒ Other (please fill in):

E. Anything else?

We're well aware that completing a questionnaire like this can be somewhat frustrating if your situation doesn't seem to correspond to the categories given or the questions asked. For this reason, in this section we offer a place for you to make additional comments of your own relating to any of the areas covered above. Please feel free to tell us anything you think would be relevant to your own professional development or that of other LCTL teachers.

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